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CAPT. D. N. WALKER'S

NOTES ON THE "CRATER FIGHT,"

JULY 30, 1864.

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Richmond, Va., July 31st, 1889.

W. P. Hopkins, Esq.
339 Broadway. Lawrence, Mass.

Dear Sir,—.

I send you herewith my notes of the "Crater" fight, my absence from town causing delay in so doing

. . . . . .

On the day of the battle of the Crater, 30th July 1864, the 13th Va. Battalion of Artillery A. N. V. was commanded by Major Wade Hampton Gibbes of S. C., as gallant a man as ever lived, Capt. Page McCarthy another gallant fellow being Adjutant.

It was composed of Davidson's Battery of Lynchburg, under command of Lieut. Jas. Otey, the Otey Battery of Richmond, under command of Capt. D. N. Walker, and the Ringgold Artillery of Pittsylvania, commanded by Capt. Crispin Dickinson. The Davidson Battery occupied the salient to the right of the Crater, the Otey Battery the next salient to the right, (and manned also a Mortar Battery, back of that position, under Lieut. John B. Langhorne of the Otey Battery) and Dickinson's Battery a position on the right of the Otey Battery.

The Horse Camp was perhaps a mile in our rear.

Awakened at dawn by the explosion at Pegram's Battery, and the heavy cannonading which followed, it was soon learned that the enemy was in possession of our line at that point, since known as the "Crater." Quite early in the action, Major Gibbes asked me to furnish him with an officer and men to man Davidson's Battery, as Lieut. Otey was in a bomb-proof utterly unfit to command, and the men had left their guns I sent at once ordering Lieut. Ed. Norvell and the men at the Horse Camp to report on the lines. Soon after this, I do not remember the time, I heard of the serious wounding of Major Gibbes, and saw him carried from the field. As I was senior Captain, in the absence of Davidson, this put me in command of the Battalion, and I at once went to the point of most importance, and took Major Gibbes place at Davidson's Battery. I found the guns idle and deserted except by two or three of the men, Corporal Hall of the Co. a gallant fellow was killed.

The embrasure of the most important gun was filled up, and we could not fire over it. With the aid of these men and some infantry, the embrasure was cleaned, and this Gun which bore on the left of the enemy, continued its deadly work, Capt. Preston of the Va. Infantry was shot while assisting us about this time, and I think another officer of the same command was wounded. Soon after this, Lieut. Norvell and the men from the Otey Battery arrived, and this gun kept up an incessant fire until the end, and the only other gun of this battery of any use in this fight was also worked by them.

A great injustice has been done these men of the Otey Battery by the Orators and writers of this Crater Fight, and confusion has been produced by a similarity of names. The men of the Otey Battery manned the guns of Davidson's Battery after they were abandoned. Lieut. Otey who was court-martialed for cowardice and ordered to be shot, but pardoned by President Davis or his sentence commuted to reduction to the ranks, had no connection whatever with the Battery of that name.

A month or more after the Crater Fight, the Davidson Battery was put under command of that most gallant officer, Capt. Hampden Chamberlayne, not because he was at the Crater, but because he was thought to be the proper officer to command it. When the enemy after the explosion entered our works, they should have pushed on; but they faltered, why I know not, allowing our men who had retreated on either side of the Crater to rally to the adjacent salient, and to recover from the confusion. Then when they attempted to push on to Blanford, the sharp shooting of a few determined men, and the fire of artillery on both flanks, and a battery it our rear, commanded I think by Capt. Flanders of Haskell's Battalion, (to whom due credit has never been given) caused them to take refuge in the Crater. In the mean time the Mortar Batteries, certainly the one manned by Otey Battery men under Lieut. Langhorne, (Private George Savage of the Otey Battery was shot through the right foot, while carrying an order from Major Gibbes to Lieut. Langhorne but succeeded in reaching him and Capt. Page McCarty was wounded near the Mortar Battery endeavoring to reach the lines) and I think also the others to our left, all all so skillfully arranged by the engineer in anticipation of this fight commenced their work, and the fate of the day was almost decided before the infantry called from our right reached the field.

Who the engineer was who constructed these works, I do not know, (but I have since learned that it was Gen. Harris of Beauregard's staff,) but I considered him the winner of the battle, and his name should be known I do not wish to detract from the courage and dash of what is known as Mahone's first charge, seldom equalled, never surpassed. But it gained no foothold on the line between the Crater and our position, and that is all I could see or know anything about.

The earth thrown up by the explosion formed a line between the crater and the enemy perhaps 12ft high. The enemy had to pass over this to get into the Crater from their line and vice versa, and the open field between these two points was swept by by this one gun of Davidson's Battery and by Wright's Battery of 4 guns belonging to the command of Colonel Hilary Jones, another man deserving more credit than he will ever receive. Huddled together by thousands in and around the Crater, the mortars and sharp-shooters and napoleons on either side were hurling destruction every minute, if not second, and sweeping the open field like a tornado, there was no place to retreat, no place for shelter. There was a gradual accumulation of dead and wounded until from our position, it looked like an inclined plane of dead men, stretching from the top of the works for perhaps 100 ft., and the balance of the field was thickly covered with the dead and wounded, when the fire of the enemy's artillery was weakening perceptibly, and that from the Crater had almost ceased, the second charge of Mahone was made and most gallantly. Some 200 or 300 of the enemy attempted to get back to the lines, and we gave them 2 rounds of canister, and I expect Col. Jones gave them more. The infantry had charged the dead and dying, which the artillerry had been pummelling for 6 or 8 hours, the firing ceased, the fight was over and the victory was ours. I entered the Crater, war is horrible and here was one of its most horrible pictures, men mangled in every conceivable way, with great ugly wounds, torn to pieces, dismembered, showing that shells not minnies had caused this dreadful destruction.

The credit of this victory, I have thought and still think was due in the first place, to the engineer who arranged our lines, leaving us who were on the lines, to be blown up somewhere; and if not blown up, to terribly avenge the death of our comrades on the very spot of their destruction, and to thus save Petersburg and Richmond. In the second place, it was due to the artillery. The guns of Davidson's Battery on the right and those of Col. Jones on the left, swept the front of the Crater, rendering an advance from the enemy's line of retreat from them, practically impossible to any large body of troops while the guns commanding the rear of our line kept back any advance form the Crater towards Petersburg. The mortars did the balance, though I do not know the effect produced by the Otey Battery and Dickinson's guns which were fired down the hollow in front of the Crater by order from Gen. Lee direct. I presumed to demoralise the troops massed there.

It was an artillery fight, and they nobly performed their duty. Where any failed their places were filled by others, who never faltered, who finally left the lines, when forced, without desertions, and who remained steadfast to the Lost Cause, even to saving the artillery column of the Army of N. Va. from Sheridan's Cavalry at Appomatox Depot.

This paper has been submitted to Col. H. P. Jones, who commanded the artillery on our right of the Crater, to Lieut. Page McCarthy, adjt. of the 13 Va. Battalion, to George Savage, M. West, and R. Fleming and others who were with the guns and mortars and is considered by them correct as to facts.

A quarter of a century has passed since the events of which we write transpired. Another quarter of a century will hardly leave a survivor.

With kind regards I am

Yours Truly,

D. N. Walker.

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